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SUBJECT: HAZARDOUS AIR QUALITY ON THE RISE IN NORTHERN THAILAND

REF: A. A. 2007 CHIANG MAI 41

[1](#)B. B. 2007 CHIANG MAI 51

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Summary

[1](#)1. With poor air quality levels surpassing the safety threshold, Chiang Mai and the northern provinces of Thailand are facing another hazy March. Small dust particle (PM10) measurements have peaked at hazardous levels sparking a concerned response from the Royal household. Post staff and families have felt the impact of the poor air quality in a wave of respiratory illnesses. While a cloud of haze blankets the city, however, public warnings of potential dangers remain low. At present, poor air quality continues to rise and will likely worsen before it improves with the coming of the rainy season expected in early May. End Summary.

PM10 Climbs to Hazardous Levels

[1](#)2. March is known in Chiang Mai for rising temperatures and declining air quality (refs A and B). This March is no different, with hazardous air quality levels on the rise, a result primarily of slash-and-burn farming techniques still practiced in northern Thailand and Burma. The air quality is measured by the level of dust particles smaller than 10 microns in the air, termed PM10. When the level of PM10 in the air is below 120 micrograms per cubic meter, the Pollution Control Department of Thailand deems the level of dust "safe."

[1](#)3. So far this year, PM10 levels peaked twice, first from March 6 to 7 and again on March 24. During the first peak in early March, the three air quality monitoring stations located in Chiang Mai reported levels as high as 141, 138, and 144 micrograms per cubic meter. On March 24, the levels climbed to 154, 170 and 206 micrograms per cubic meter. These published PM10 levels are daily averages of hourly measurements. Certain times in the day, especially dusk, face higher PM10 levels; but these peaks are lost in the averaging system. The three monitoring sites in Chiang Mai are located at the Provincial Hall, the Yupparat School, and the Royal Family's Phuping Palace atop Doi Suthep mountain at the city's edge.

A Royal Pain in the Neck

¶4. The Phuping Palace monitoring station, set up in February because of concerns of forest fires erupting dangerously close to the palace grounds, suggests high-level RTG awareness of the air quality crisis. Phuping Palace is the Royal family's summer home in Chiang Mai, and is located atop Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai's landmark mountain which sits barely visible behind the thick cloud of haze blanketing the city. This March's PM10 levels have caught the attention of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who has requested daily reports on the haze situation in the north. In remarks that made front-page news March 26, the King told the press that if the situation did not improve, he would order artificial rainmaking to relieve the air pollution.

Consulate Staff Under the Weather

¶5. Post staff has already felt the impact of declining air quality in the city. Both American and Thai staff and family members have reported becoming sick with respiratory ailments and eye irritation. At least 10 members of the Consulate community have visited post's nurse with respiratory problems since March 7. Symptoms have included severe coughing, sinus and respiratory infections, allergy attacks, and eye irritation. According to the Pollution Control Department, PM10 is among the most harmful air pollutants, causing many kinds of respiratory illnesses due to dust particles that get lodged deep in the lungs.

Comment

¶6. Because official PM10 levels are reported as averages, variation of air quality levels throughout any given day are lost, and daily levels can appear artificially low. Moreover, the paucity of public warnings of hazardous air quality, combined with falsely reassuring announcements from the provincial government that air conditions are still far from hazardous, leave much of the public unconcerned of the dangers

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of breathing the air outside. Meanwhile, PM10 levels continue to rise; and air quality could likely worsen before it improves with the coming of the rainy season expected in early May.
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